Lesson One, Handout Three

What to do: Read the following fictionalized testimonial by Victoria Shorey, youngest daughter of William Shorey the noted African American whaling ship captain. Photocopy and enlarge the accompanying photo, or copy them on to transparencies and use an overhead projector as you read aloud.

Suggestion: have students interview their parents or guardians about their family heritage. How did they arrive here in California? Do they know how their families traveled to the West Coast? Have volunteers share some of these stories before reading Victoria's story.



MY FATHER THE CAPTAIN: VICTORIA SHOREY, 1908

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Hello, my name is Victoria Shorey. This is a picture of me and my family when I was about 3 years old. I am now 9. My family and I live in Oakland where my father is a well- known man. His name is William Shorey. That's him standing behind me in the picture. He is famous because he was captain of a whaling ship.

My father was born on the island of Barbados, in the Caribbean, in 1859. Like him, most of the people on Barbados were descended from African slaves who were brought there against their will to work the sugar cane fields. By the time my father was born, however, slavery was illegal on the island. He told me that when he was young he felt restless, and that even though slavery had been abolished, there were few opportunities for him to get a respectable job.

My father loves to tell my sister and me stories, and he once told us how he shipped out to Massachusetts when he was not much older than I am now. He was 15 when he sailed on his first trip. He wasn't but a year older when he went on his first whaling voyage.

He gets a funny look in his eye when he tells us how hard those early trips were. Capturing a big whale from a small ship's boat is really dangerous, and some of the trips could last up to 3 years without returning back to their home port. Imagine that, leaving your family and friends for that amount of time. Why that would be like saying good-bye to my parents in fourth grade and not seeing them again until I was in the seventh grade.

I'm sure my father must have missed my grandparents an awful lot.

At the end of one of his voyages the ship he was on ended up here in San Francisco. By now my father was an officer on board and helped the captain to run the ship. After a few more trips to hunt the whale he became captain himself, becoming the only captain of African-American decent on the Pacific Coast. That was in 1886.

"What a time that was. Became captain and married Miss Julia Ann Shelton all in one year," he likes to say with a big smile on his face.

Julia Ann Shelton, that was my mother's maiden name. She has her share of stories too. She spent her honeymoon at sea with my father. She was like part of the crew. Like many captain's wives, my mother helped to navigate the ship when they were underway. Mother gets excited when she explains this to me. It had to do with measuring how high the sun was above the horizon at the same time every day, then using an almanac, a kind of table with numbers that tells you how far west or east you have traveled. Sometimes she would measure the height of a star at night to double check. Papa says this was a very important part of running a ship and he was glad to have her help.

Captains are lucky in that they get to bring their families on trips if they want to. No one else on the ship gets to do this. From the time my parents were married, my mother, and later my sister and me, would accompany my father on many of his voyages.

I was always glad to be with my family, even at sea, but this could be difficult as well. We would spend many weeks underway often without seeing any land. Aside from my older sister there were no other children on board. I missed my friends back in Oakland.

On board we lived in the aft part of the ship (in the back) and were forbidden from wandering forward. Father use to say that it was no place for a young lady. Truth be told, half the time I didn't want to go near the place. After a whale had been cut up and brought on board, the pieces were boiled in huge caldrons to get the whale oil out. It smelled so awful that a saying went like this: ships that could not yet see a whaler could smell one. Imagine what it smelled like being on board a working whale ship.

Well, it wasn't all bad. We knew our father and mother were doing something important. Whale oil was needed to light the lamps in people's houses back in San Francisco, and to help new machines to run. We also got to see very interesting places like Honolulu on the island of Hawaii, and Alaska.

I even got my name in the papers once. When I was just 3 years old this appeared in a San Francisco newspaper:

"Commanded by Baby Shorey and the baby's father, Captain Shorey, the whaling bark **Andrew Hicks**, came down from the north this morning... The baby and the whaler have been at sea since February, most of the time in Okhotsk waters" (near Japan).

"The baby is only 3 years old, and we must give her due credit for so young a navigator. She and her father steered their bark further to the north than any other whaler ventured this year."

"Victoria is the name of the 3 year old child that has been engaged in hunting whales all summer while most other children have been engaged in less venturesome occupations..."

"'Victoria is a remarkable sailor,' said the mother. 'She knows all the ropes and has perfect command of her father.'"

Journal Reflections:

• Whale oil was very important to people in the last part of the 1800s. So many whales were hunted that many species of whale became endangered of becoming extinct. Find out why whales were so important and why some countries wish to hunt whales even today and write a short report.

• Can you think of kids today who might be living like Victoria was in the 1880s. Some kids have to follow their parents to many different parts of the world. For example, children of circus performers spend a good part of each year traveling with the show. The circus provides a classroom on wheels so that kids won't miss out on their schooling. What would it be like to have a life like this? What might be exciting about it? What might not be so good about such a life?